Chanukkah

The Western Wind

Narrated by

Theodore Bikel

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The music for this *Chanukkah Story* is an eclectic compilation of songs and compositions from many different sources reflecting the diverse and multi-national nature of the Jewish experience.

The oldest music on the recording is drawn from the songs of the Spanish Jews, the *Sephardim.* Residing in Spain for a millennium until their expulsion in 1492, the Spanish Jewish community carried thousands of songs with them to the Near East, Greece, Italy, North Africa, England and Holland as part of their rich cultural heritage. These songs, many of them in Ladino (the Spanish vernacular of the Sephardim), Hebrew, or a mixture of both, were passed on from generation to generation until they were captured for posterity—notated—by early twentieth-century musicologists. These songs often personalize and elaborate on biblical stories—*Mi Ze Y'malel* gives us a Chanukkah history lesson in five verses of elegant Hebrew. Another songs give us delicious details of everyday life—*Hazeremos Una Merenda.* Perhaps the best known Chanukkah song is *Maoz Tzur,* an acrostic poem by Mordechai from the 13th century. Its rapid dispersal throughout Europe at the time of the Third Crusade, a period of vicious persecutions, attests to the morale-raising power of the Maccabean heroic archetype. Our recording presents two versions of *Maoz Tzur:* Hugo Chaim Adler's setting of the Benedetto Marcello tune, and the popular German synagogue hymn. Both melodies have interesting and traceable histories.

In about 1720 in a synagogue in Venice, the Italian composer and Judeophile, Benedetto Marcello (1686-1739), heard a hymn sung by Venice's German Jewish community. Recognizing a great tune when he heard it, he carefully transcribed *Maoz Tzur* with the music written from right to left in Hebrew. He published this Hebrew transcription above his own setting (in Italian) of Psalm 15 which he based on this haunting Jewish melody. Over the years many Jewish composers harmonized this melody but often attributed their compositions to Marcello. The first version of *Maoz Tzur* sung on *The Chanukkah Story* is a four-part setting of Marcello's transcription by Hugo Chaim Adler (1896-1955). Originally published as *By The Waters of Babylon,* Adler created a lucid composition in a contemporary idiom that illuminates the beauty and the rapture of this melody.

The second version of *Maoz Tzur (Rock of Ages* in English) is one which will be familiar to almost every Jew of German and Eastern European background as well as Christians raised in the Protestant tradition. Our harmonized version is taken from the *Union Hymnal,* the songbook of the late 19th-century American German Jewish community. This melody is based on some of the same sources that Luther used for his hymns—German folk melodies from the Renaissance.

Folk melodies form a major part of the music on *The Chanukkah Story.* The texts for these songs were written by several important writers who were part of a movement, starting in the 1850's, to create two new literary languages: Yiddish and modern Hebrew. Yiddish had evolved since the middle ages as the vernacular of European Jewry, but its literature only began late in the 19th century. Mordkhe Rivesman (1868-1924), who provided the poems for *Chanukkah Oy Chanukkah* and *Tzindt On Likhtelekh,* was an important figure in the development of Yiddish poetry. Two of their counterparts in developing a modern Hebrew literature were Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934), author of the text for *Lichvod Hachanukkah,* and Levin Kipnis (b. 1894) who wrote many poems for children, including *Mi Ze Hidlik,* and *S'vivon.* The marriage of these Yiddish and Hebrew poems to folk melodies supports the poets' aspiration to create a literature that was rooted in the experience and language of the people.

A corresponding Yiddish art-song movement pioneered by well-educated and musically literate composers is represented on our recording by Solomon Golub (1887-1952), Michel Gelbart (1899-1966), and Meir Posner (1892-1931). Often beginning their musical careers as boy soprano "meshorerim," choristers who improvised accompaniments for cantors, these composers went on to conservatory training in Europe and came to America in the early decades of the twentieth century intent on raising the level of Jewish music. Gelbart organized the Workmen's Circle chorus and devoted himself to educating children and creating children's music—and lyrics under the nom de plume of Ben Aaron—like his Chanukkah "hit," *I Have a Little Dreydle.* Posner succeeded Gelbart as the conductor of the Workmen's Circle chorus, authored a Yiddish harmony text, and created a Yiddish singing translation of Mendelssohn's oratorio, *Elijah.* They were also popularizers of contemporary Yiddish poetry as evidenced by Solomon Glub's setting of *Boruch Ate, Zingt Der Tate* by Avrom Reisen (1876-1953), which touchingly conveys the harsher side of the American experience and the uplifting energy of the Chanukkah lights.

Certainly no recording containing Yiddish songs could be complete without a "number" by Avrom Goldfaden (1840-1908), the founder of the Yiddish musical theater. A musically illiterate tunesmith, Goldfaden brought the music of the Eastern European ghetto to the stages of Europe and America. The children's song, *Drey Zikh Dreldele,* is actually a tune from Goldfaden's operetta, *Bar Kochba,* with new words by Chana Mlotek.

The nineteenth-century European classical music tradition is represented on *The Chanukkah Story* by Louis Lewandowski's (1821-1894) lyrical setting of *Hanerot Hallalu.* Reminiscent of Mendelssohn, his linear writing and stirring harmonies convery the majesty of the Prayer Book command to use the Chanukkah lights only for contemplation.

Lastly, we have asked Elliot Z. Levine to provide original compositions to complete our story. Mr. Levine, a singer/composer in the Western Wind for more than 20 years, has set Zachariah's prophetic utterance, *Lo B'Chayil* (Not by Might). Using vigorous folk melody, he has also fashioned a new polyphonic arrangement of *Al Hanissim* (Of the Miracles), the sole reference to the Maccabees in the Prayer Book.

William Zukof

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